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Ekoji Buddhist Sangha

by Julia Bratu

For my first field trip, I went to a Sunday Zen Buddhism service at the Ekoji Buddhist Sangha. The temple itself is located in a quaint neighborhood, right by Carytown at the address 3411 Grove Avenue, Richmond VA 23221. The lay leader is Kevin Heffernan. The service that I attended was on Sunday 9/27 at 9 am.

The appearance of the building initially threw me off, as just being inside of a house in a neighborhood outside of Carytown. It fit in so well with all of the others, that I initially went to the wrong house on accident and had to be directed a few houses down. I feel that this actually fits in well with the warmth of the sangha, though. The moment I stepped inside, I immediately noticed about twenty mats and cushions laid about the room and what resembled an altar table at the other end of the room, right by a door open to the outside. On the table in the center there was a small pot, and behind that a few cards with some names and dates standing up which I assumed were prayers of a sort for members of the community. Before actually stepping inside, a sign that read 'please remove shoes before entering' also caught my attention. Being somewhat anxious in unfamiliar situations, I quietly sat down in a chair by the door to remove my shoes and put them with a few others on a nearby shelf.

Afterwards, a woman who was speaking with another newcomer noticed me and immediately welcomed me. She asked me if I had ever

been to a Zen Buddhist service before, which I hadn't. She suggested that I go to one of their orientations that they held on the first and third Sundays of each month in order to learn Zazen meditation practices, but offered me some advice anyway and asked that I stay. The reason why I didn't initially attend the orientation session before going to the service is that I'm already practiced in meditation, and I did a lot of research on Zazen meditation in order to prepare for my field trip. Not to say that I felt like I knew better, but I wanted to try and get a fresh feel for journey that I was about to embark. The woman also gave me a quick rundown of the service, and offered to show me where the chairs were if I preferred to sit in a chair during meditation.

As for the people attending, they appeared to be from all different backgrounds, but primarily middle-aged. I remember specifically one woman who brought her son who could have only been about 6 years old. He made it through the service just as well as the adults, with a small smile always on his face. He greeted everyone the same way the adults did, by bowing with his fingertips touching lightly. Aside from the casual conversation, everyone immediately went to their mats to meditate before the service even started. Because of this, it was difficult for me to speak with others before we began. It was comforting to know that everyone was so eager to begin.

Before the service, I noticed that the lay leader

greeted each person with a bow at the door. Each person bowed in turn and then bowed towards the room. Once they reached their mats, they bowed before they sat down. I tried to follow the example.

Once I had finished speaking with the woman who offered me advice, I chose a mat close to a corner and sat down to face the wall, as is custom. I was told that it was to keep us free from distraction, since zazen style meditation involves keeping the eyes slightly open. Another important part of the meditation technique is the placement of the hands, one palm in beneath the other with the thumbs lightly touching making an oval. Called the madra of zazen, it represents the unity of all things and helps keep you grounded during meditation. The first part of the service was 30 minutes of sitting meditation. During this period, I sat cross legged and tried to keep my back straight as possible. I focused on my breathing, which proved much more difficult than my usual manner of meditation where I focus on a certain subject. I found my mind wandering constantly and tried to correct myself. Because of the cushion, I also found my limbs going numb often. I had to quietly correct myself each time, or move my foot. As much as I wanted to feel like I had gotten something out of it, I felt like this first period of meditation was like an adult timeout for me. I was self-conscious, because it seemed like everyone else was having such an easy time with being still and focusing. That was also probably just the product of my own imagination, and due to the fact that they had been at this for far longer.

The second part of the service began with the ringing of a gong. During this period of time, we stood up, bowed at our mats and then the

room, and then rolled our mats in half and put the cushions on top to make room for walking meditation. Walking meditation was traditionally practiced by Zen Buddhists by walking clockwise around a room with the hands in shashu (what I read as one fist covering the other, just in front of the navel. Despite that, I had to see other do it to get it right). During walking meditation, we let our eyes wander and walked very slowly, in step with our breath. It was during this time that I realized that I had almost no idea who else was in the room with me. That made me uncomfortable at first until I realized the symbolism behind this, and facing the wall, and focusing on the breath. Aside from being free of distraction, I realized that the whole point was to be at one with both myself and everything else. I had no way to differentiate myself from others if I was only simply aware that there were others in the room, moving in tune with me. While I was walking I also noticed the decorations in the room, and at the very back of my mind noted that most of them were meant to keep the space sacred. The pot on the altar was meant to keep ashes from the incense offerings, and the colors prevalent in the room were red and gold mixed with earthy tones, which I believe is part of a conscious effort to form the idea of the enlightened mixed with the mundane.

Once we finished walking meditation, another gong was sounded and we went back to our mats, bowed and began to meditate for another 30 minutes. This time, I did far better, and I found myself simply noticing things rather than just letting my mind wander aimlessly. The door open to the outside allowed for the sound of birds in the trees to flow throughout the room. Even the ruffle of the leaves in the wind helped me to concentrate and remain focused and calm. I think that the walking

meditation really resonated with me and helped me to relax for the rest of the time I was there.

The last part of the service, we moved all of our mats to the middle of the room and lit an incense offering. We bowed all the way to the ground three times before we began reciting the sutras for that service. Among them was the heart sutra and Sho Sai Myo Kichijo Dharani. The recitation of sutras is important in Buddhism, because it is believed to connect one to the Buddha by reciting the teaching, thus bringing you closer to enlightenment. I could see how this all came into play while we were reciting. It felt as if we were all one, and although Sho Sai Myo Kichio Dharani was in a language I couldn't understand, it felt profound and like it was with purpose. Everyone in the room spoke in perfect harmony, creating a somber but intensely focused atmosphere. Once we completed recitation of the sutras, we bowed three more times to the ground and the service ended. The woman who helped me at the very beginning bade me farewell, and feeling much more at peace than I did when I came, I left.

After the service, I sat down and began to think more about my time at the sangha. I did a little bit of research on Buddhism and the meaning behind the sutras that we recited, and I realized that I benefitted greatly from my visit. In this fast paced world, we never get the time to sit down, focus and just be. Even while writing this days later, I still feel much more at peace than I was before I had gone. I'm thinking about visiting again sometime soon. •

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